

APPEARED
ON PAGE **A23**.

WASHINGTON POST
30 July 1986

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Embassy Intervention

Two weeks ago the Israeli Embassy delivered a secret admonition to Vice President George Bush not to visit Syria on his current Middle East trip, an unusual intrusion showing Israel's influence over U.S. policy quietly at work on decisions that U.S. diplomats insist should not be made by Israel.

Bush was undecided about seeing President Hafez Assad. Abraham Tamir, director general of Prime Minister Shimon Peres' office, had earlier expressed a "personal opinion" during a visit to Bush's office on an unrelated matter that going to Damascus might be worth it.

But the Israeli Embassy takes orders from the Likud Party hard-liner, Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, as well as the Labor Party's Peres. When word of Tamir's advice reached the embassy, the Israeli minister, Ely Rubenstein, was rushed to Bush's office within 24 hours with this word: Stay off the road to Damascus.

In retrospect, Bush's quick agreement with Rubenstein may have cost him political capital. On Saturday, the day after Bush left Washington with an eight-member "advisory group" of American Jewish leaders, Assad was credited with playing a role in gaining the release of the Rev. Lawrence Jenco. Jenco was one of five Americans seized in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, presumably by radical pro-Iranian Shiites.

Middle East specialists here speculate that the timing of Jenco's release may have been intended to send this provocative message from Assad to Secretary of State George Shultz: Boycotting Syria will doom U.S. efforts to ease the Arab-Israeli dispute.

True or not, Rubenstein's strong advice to boycott Damascus typifies what Arab critics here are now calling the "Israelization" of American policy in the Middle East. In the case of Syria's Assad, that calls for the United States to continue denying the centrality of his influence and power and to block any possibility of a U.S.-Syrian détente.

In opposing a Bush stop in Damascus, Rubenstein said his government worried that Assad would improve his image from all the ceremonial aspects of the vice president's visit. With Syria accused by Britain of direct complicity in the aborted terrorist effort last spring to blow up an El Al airliner flying from London to Tel Aviv, the guilty Assad would unduly profit from all the publicity.

U.S. diplomats here, however, say that no proof has ever linked Assad personally to involvement in or knowledge about the El Al near-tragedy. They claim that Assad's personal liability in the affair may be roughly on a par with Prime Minister Peres' personal liability for Jonathan Pollard, the confessed Israeli spy. The Israeli government, contending that Pollard was recruited and bossed by a rogue spy ring beyond the government's control, asserts it had nothing to do with Pollard. That view has not been publicly disputed by Shultz.

Assad's political strategy in demonstrating the centrality of his influence in the Arab world has been on full view the past few weeks. In addition to taking at least partial credit for Father Jenco's release, he has moved powerful armed contingents into Lebanon to assert his claims there; he is being politically wooed by Jordan's King Hussein, who used to be America's most loyal Arab ally (and argued for Bush to visit Damascus); and he took the lead in belittling the "summit" between Peres and King Hassan of Morocco, probably causing Hassan to resign as head of the Arab League.

But policy makers here seem unimpressed. There were few raised eyebrows among Shultz's top Mideast aides when The Jerusalem Post recently editorialized that despite Pollard's spying and the U.S. investigations of other Israeli operations here, "Israel is entitled to special consideration from the U.S., even to the extent of benignly overlooking borderline Israeli activities in America."

©1986, News America Syndicate